DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 109 PS 019 642

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TITLE Why and How Some Mothers Talk More to Their Children than Other Mothers.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Seattle, WA, April 18-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; *Interpersonal Communication; *Mothers; *Parent Child Relationship; *Toddlers; Upper Class; *Verbal Communication; Working Class
IDENTIFIERS *Conversation

ABSTRACT

This study examined transcripts of 63 mealtime, dyadic interactions of mothers and their children. An earlier investigation of the effects of social class and communicative setting on maternal speech found a significant class difference and within-class variability in the amount of speech mothers directed to their children. There were significant class differences in the functions and discourse properties of maternal speech, differences which may have contributed to increased verbal output by the mothers. In this study, the mothers were from the working class and upper-middle class. Children averaged 20.1 months of age. Transcripts were examined in an effort to determine the difference between groups and the variability in each group in maternal verbal output. Findings suggest that the amount of child-directed speech mothers produce is a function of: (1) characteristics of conversational style that mothers bring to interactions with their children and that operate independent of the children's conversational behavior; and (2) characteristics of the children's contribution to discourse. Characteristics of mothers differed between groups. Variability within groups was a function of how much the children talked. (SH)

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WHY AND HOW SOME MOTHERS TALK MORE TO THEIR CHILDREN THAN OTHER MOTHERS

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Paper presented as part of the symposium "Language development in context" (Lucia French, Chair) at the 1991 meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development, Seattle, WA, April 18-20.

PS 019642

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WHY AND HOW SOME MOTHERS TALK MORE TO THEIR CHILDREN THAN OTHER MOTHERS

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Background

In an earlier investigation of the effects of social class and communicative setting on maternal speech (Hoff-Ginsberg, in press), I found both a significant class difference and substantial within-class variability in how much speech mothers address to their children.

A variety of sources of evidence suggest that the amount of speech addressed to children influences the children's language development. Hence, differences in maternal verbal output are one example of today's theme: differences that make a difference.

In the previous investigation, several possible explanations for the between-class difference were ruled out. In the samples studied there were no class differences in

--mothers' expressed attitudes towards children as communicative partners

--mothers' interest in interacting with their children when measured with a nonverbal measure (joint attention)

-- static characteristics of the children that might be influencing the mothers such as age, language level as measured by MLU and number of word roots used, gender, or birth order.

In contrast, there was a class difference in the mothers' verbal output in response to standardized interview questions posed by an adult researcher. This finding led us to hypothesize that the source of the class difference in the amount of speech addressed to children was a class difference in conversational style.

Thus our proposed answer to the <u>why</u> part of the question that titles this talk is that some mothers talk more to their children than other mothers--at least in part--because they talk more to everybody.

The focus of this talk is on the <u>how</u> part of the question. That is, are there differences among mothers in how they carry on a conversation with their children that might account for the differences in verbal output?

Before getting into the details of the study, it is important to point out that the answer to the above question could be <u>no</u>. That is, mothers who talk more could do the exact same sorts of things in conversation as mothers who talk less and just do equally more of everything. However, in the previous study we

found significant class differences in the functions and discourse properties of maternal speech. In terms of speech functions, the working class mothers asked their children fewer conversation-eliciting questions and issued more behavior directives than the upper middle class mothers. In terms of the discourse properties of speech, the working class mothers provided topic-continuing replies to fewer of their children's utterances. So we know that the two groups of mothers were not doing the same sorts of things. Furthermore, the ways in which the groups of mothers differed seemed to be good candidates for aspects of language use that might contribute to differences in the amount of talk produced.

In separate studies, albeit with older children, I have found that children are more likely to respond to maternal utterances when the maternal utterances are conversation-eliciting questions (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1990) and when maternal utterances continue a topic in the child's prior utterance (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1987). These characteristics of maternal speech may contribute to greater verbal output by the mothers because they engage the children in conversation. When the burden of sustaining conversation is shared, conversation may be sustainable for longer. This line of reasoning predicts that there should be differences in the children's verbal output corresponding to differences in maternal verbal output.

In pursuing the <u>how</u> question, I was interested in both the difference between groups and also the considerable variability that existed within each group in maternal verbal output. We know from the findings of the previous study that class differences in maternal output are accompanied by class differences in the functions and discourse properties of maternal speech. The present study was designed to ask whether these characteristics of maternal speech also correlate with within-class variability in maternal output, and to test the hypothesis that these characteristics of maternal speech contribute to sustaining discourse longer by engaging the child in conversation.

Method

Subjects and data collection procedure:

The data came from transcripts of the mealtime, dyadic interactions of 63 mothers and their children. The mealtime conversations were selected for analysis because these were the most naturalistic of the settings that we recorded--that is, the researchers gave the instruction to "eat breakfast as you normally do," no time limit was imposed, and the interactions were recorded in their entirety.

The mothers came from two social classes:

Working class = no more than a high school education, same for husbands, and husbands had blue collar occupations (n = 30).

Upper middle class = college educated, same for husbands, and husband had white collar occupations (n = 33).

The children averaged 20.1 months old, MLU = 1.2.

Speech measures:

Two coding schemes were applied to the transcripts and provide the measures to be reported. One coded the functions of maternal speech; the other coded the topic relations in maternal speech.

The function measures that showed a between-group difference were the percent of maternal utterances that were judged to be intended to elicit conversation on the part of the child and the percent of maternal utterances that were judged to be intended to direct the child's behavior. There was a significant negative correlation between the frequencies of conversation-eliciting utterances and behavior directives, so in the interest of containing the number of variables to be analyzed only the rate of conversation-eliciting utterances was used in the present study.

The discourse measure that showed a between-group difference was the percent of child utterances that received a topic-continuing reply. Because this measure was not independent of the number of maternal utterances produced we instead calculated the frequencies of different sorts of topic relations in maternal speech as a percent of maternal utterances. The code for topic relations included four categories: continues topic of own prior utterance, continues topic of prior utterance by the child, introduces new topic, and topic relation indeterminate. Because these add up to 100% we needed to use only three of the four categories.

Data analysis strategy

Correlates of between-group differences in verbal output were looked for by using t-tests of between group differences in measures of language function, discourse relations, and child verbal output.

Correlates of within group variability in verbal output were looked for by using Pearson product moment correlations--calculated separately within each class--to test the relation between variation in verbal output and variation in measures of language function, discourse relations, and child verbal output.

Results

Between-group differences:

Speech measure	WC	UPMC	t	p
Number of maternal utts	181(105)	260(136)	2.58	.01
% conversation-eliciting	32(12)	40(11)	2.52	.01
% continue own topic	27(9)	33(6)	2.98	.001
% continue child topic	25(10)	23(6)	|<1|	ns
% topic indeterminate	34(7)	29(6)	-2.56	.01
Number of child utts	137(94)	147(72)	|<1|	ns

Conclusions about between-group differences:

--Although asking more conversation-eliciting questions seems as though it might contribute to sustaining discourse longer by engaging the child in conversation, the class difference in question asking was not accompanied by a class difference in the amount of child speech. (Other researchers have found that children as young as the present subjects do respond to questions, but in these data the mothers' use of conversation-eliciting questions was not related to the amount of speech the children produced--either between or within groups). Thus, we have to conclude that group differences in maternal verbal output are not due to differences in mothers' abilities to engage the child in a conversation that can be jointly sustained.

--The group difference seems due to mothers' abilities to carry the burden of conversation by themselves. Mothers who talk longer on a single topic (as evidenced by difference in % of utterances that continue own topic) and ask the child questions address more speech to their children. This style of talk may be easier to sustain than a style of talk that switches topics and consists of a greater proportion of behavior directives.

Within-group variability:

Working class

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Number mat. utts	1.00					
2. % conv. eliciting	.07	1.00				
3. % cont. own topic	.04	-.04	1.00			
4. % cont. ch. topic	.19	-.03	-.53*	1.00		
5. % indeterminate topic	-.32	.08	-.30	-.49*	1.00	
6. Number ch utts	.81*	-.09	-.32	.55*	-.26	1.00

Upper middle class

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Number mat. utts	1.00					
2. % conv. eliciting	-.27	1.00				
3. % cont. own topic	.14	.17	1.00			
4. % cont. ch. topic	-.08	.03	-.58*	1.00		
5. % indeterminate topic	-.23	.01	-.20	-.31	1.00	
6. Number ch utts	.70*	-.35	-.33	.30	-.01	1.00

Conclusions about within group variability:

There are two things to notice in these matrices: First, the number of maternal utterances and the number of child utterances produced were highly correlated in each group. Second, the number of child utterances was not related to any properties of maternal speech. Thus, the correlates of within-group variability in maternal verbal output were different from the correlates of the between-group difference. Within group variability--for both groups--was a function of how much the children talked and was unrelated to the characteristics of language use that showed between-group differences.

Summary and conclusions

Working class and upper middle class mothers differ in their conversational styles. Upper middle class mothers sustain a single topic across utterances and ask questions more than working class mothers. These differences in style are associated with group differences in amount mothers talk to their children and may contribute to those differences, but they are not associated with any concurrent group differences in the children's conversational behavior.

The aspects of conversational style that differ between groups do not account for variability in maternal output within groups. Rather, it is the children's conversational behavior that is

associated with within group variability. Mothers talk more to children who talk more.

In sum, these data suggest that the amount of child-directed speech mothers produce is a function of (a) characteristics of conversational style that mothers bring with them to interaction with their children and which operate independent of the children's conversational behavior and (b) characteristics of the children's contribution to discourse. In the present samples, the characteristics of the mothers differed between groups, and there was less variability among mothers within each group. In contrast, the characteristics of the children did not differ between groups but did vary within both groups.

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